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ABSTRACT

Several techniques for teaching film appreciation to adults are discussed, including the use of audio cassettes, instructional films, silent films, and film dissection. Included are the techniques, philosophy, and content of a seminar on the short film, in which the short film is viewed as a variant of a short story, a pop song, a joke, and a poem. A course outline showing the films utilized and their running times is appended. (STS)

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Film in Education: This Worked for Me.

A Paper Presented at the Ninth

Midwest Film Conference.

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Chicago, Illinois February 20, 1977

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ABSTRACT

Film In Education: This Worked For Me.

This paper discusses several techniques which have been proven useful in teaching film courses. It also describes in detail the philosophy behind, and the techniques employed in a particular seminar on the short film. Techniques discussed include using audio cassettes, using instructional films, using silent films and the dissection of a particular film. The short film is viewed as a variant of a short story, a pop song, a joke and a poem. A course outline is included.

This paper will discuss several techniques which have been proven useful in teaching film courses over the years, and will conclude with an outline and a discussion of one course, the Seminar on the Short Film.

The techniques are: 1) Using audio cassettes, 2) using instructional films, 3) the use of silents and 4) dissecting a film.

1. Audio Cassettes

When teaching bone weary adults at night every stratagem for conserving time and enlivening the course becomes important.

Prior lecture, showing the film and subsequent discussion must be the basic strategy employed--but providing cassettes which the students can listen to in their cars as they drive to the class is a worthwhile addition to the course.

An example of a cassette--from a series called Filmed Chats--which I have compiled, is an interview with Dr. Jack Wellman from NIU. The Graduate is discussed and, as expected, the students readily identify with the young protagonist Benjamin. Wellman wittily turns the tables and explains how Mrs. Robinson, normally considered a villainess, can be considered a victim of a vacuous and self-absorbed Benjamin. The essential shallowness and tricked-up nature of the film is exposed, usually to the student's surprise.

Another example is from The Grapes of Wrath. Dr. Rod Deihl describes how the project was kept under wraps as the producers were afraid of a rightist group pressuring their studio.

It is a good idea to interview a student who has done a good

job analyzing a film. One interview I hope to get is from a high school teacher who did an excellent critique of Nashville. This was, to my mind, a much more interesting critique than that of any professional critic I've heard or read.

2. Instructional Film.

Another stratagem in the Theory and Criticism course is to start the evening off with one of the well known instructional films on film-making such as Basic Film Terms, Graphic Aspects of Editing, or A Film on Cinematography--there must be twenty to choose from. These are often eye-openers to people with a conventional literary background, and those with a film background don't mind the ten or so minutes taken.

3. Silents.

Showing silents such as Caligari, Potemkin, or Gold Rush separates the film lovers from the course takers. One 180 minute film, What Price Glory? (1927) was well enough received by an evening class--although most enjoyed the fact that they had survived the ordeal of a silent film rather than that they had experienced the film as such. A typical reaction from a forty year old is "I've never seen a silent film." While playing appropriate music is worthwhile, trying to talk over a fiction film to explain a critical point is fraught with danger--it can annoy the group--and should only be used for compelling reasons.

4. Dissecting a Film.

The well known award winning short Skater Dater (from The American Boy trilogy) is the film I use for showing once, then reshowing by starting and stopping and rewinding the projector to point out such aspects as dynamic editing, introduction, building the story, type-casting, audio bridges, the silent film, and many other technical

factors. The teachers I've had in my class have shown it to their classes. The high school and grade school students' responses to the film and their reactions to such themes as peer group pressure and adolescent behavior are most revealing. My point is that every teacher can take one film apart by stopping and rerunning the film. If it is done once, everyone will enjoy it. If overdone, this stratagem annoys the student as he or she wants to watch the film.

The Seminar on The Short Film.

Regarding the seminar on the short film one must start by attempting to define what a short film is. After exhaustive exploration of the possibilities, because there are so many kinds of short films, one must rely on the obvious differentia--the time taken by the film. Thus while the operational definition of "short film" is particularly elusive, the descriptive definition is obvious. Brevity is the essence of wit and of the short film. No other definition need apply.

The Long Film and The Short Film.

While the short film can be compared to a poem, a short story or a pop song, the long or feature film can best be compared with a novel or a symphony. The feature is inevitably both narrative and collaborative; the short can be neither, but it may be both.

The short film is also quite unlike the television program, which, by tradition, has a procrustean edict determining its duration. The short film can allow its content or message the time it requires most naturally. Besides duration, other aspects of form are also left open. In contrast, the television program has the grabber or teaser before the first commercial interruption, a series of minor climaxes before each succeeding commercial, and the inevitable climax and denouement

before the final commercial. These rhythms are so predictable that even small children can be observed to be detached from the "willing suspension of disbelief" essential to the dramatic work. The children know from experience what the outcome will be. The catharctic potential of the short film is thus enhanced as genuine suspense uninfluenced by any known pattern is possible. Even an O. Henry ending is dramatically acceptable.

There are, of course, films which cannot properly be described as either short or long. How does one consider the 57 minute film tailored for television such as A Time For Burning? This film and any others not designed for commercial interruptions pose a taxonomic problem. In many ways, the three hour long Ophuls film The Sorrow and the Pity qualifies as a typical "short" film. The classification of "documentary" isn't much help either. "Documentary is a clumsy description," wrote John Grierson, who first coined the term "but let it stand."[1]

Different Kinds of Short Films.

On one end of the spectrum of film types is the film made under the auspices of corporate sponsorship. This has been a tradition since the 1920's when Citroen sponsored The Black Cruise.[2] In the last twenty years, the corporations obtained spun-off television documentaries from the networks and distributed them as a public relations gesture through specialized agencies such as Modern Talking Pictures.[3] Similarly, the television documentary wound up in innumerable classrooms across the United States.[4] Today, the pendulum is swinging back again towards the film made especially for cinematic distribution.[5]

At the other end of the spectrum of short film types is the personal

film made to fulfill the filmmakers drive for self-expression. This type of film most often goes largely unseen and unrecognized even if listed within the pages of a cooperative distributor's often voluminous catalog. However, a certain, although small percentage of these personal statements gain acceptance and achieve distribution. Choosing an example is almost a random task, but the films of Mary Beams such as Going Home Sketchbook, Drowning Moon or Piano Rub have the attributes of this type of film.[6]

Short Story.

The short film can be considered a filmic variant of a short story, a pop song, a joke, or a poem. Just as Margaret Mitchell's novel Gone With The Wind was made into a feature film, Ambrose Bierce's short story An Occurrence At Owl Creek Bridge was made into Robert Enrico's short film. According to the American Film Institute's Survey, this film is one of those most shown in film courses in the United States.[7] Not only a study in filmic technique, it is a comment on the value of life and challenges the viewer to think about the nature of consciousness and reality.

The short story and the short film both share the freedom of choice of dramatic structure that their brevity allows them. Whereas neither the feature film not the television program could handle the O. Henry ending, it works well in the short film.

An interesting example of the short story on the screen are the British films Trio and Quartet. These high quality productions brought Somerset Maugham short stories to the screen as anthologies in feature length films. They currently enjoy popularity on Public Television in the United States. By contrast, the feature film inspired by the

short story usually demands a new creative effort quite different from the original. The demands of the different medium almost demands a reworking of the original, as The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky and any number of short stories from the Saturday Evening Post will testify.[8]

An exquisite confection of a film, One Eyed Men Are Kings epitomizes the link betwwen the short story and the short film.[9] A harried middleaged Parisian who lives with his ancient mother and her vicious little dog Bobby pretends to be blind to achieve comradeship. The moral is both Gallic and universal. It could not be a feature film nor a television program under the present television regime, but happily the short film format existed to allow its realization.

Pop Song.

The pop song is that repetitious intrusion into our auditory lives which infiltrates our rhythmic subconscious and changes our way of thinking. One philosopher of propaganda claimed that the person who wrote the popular songs were of more influence in governing a country than the men who wrote the laws. Certainly we can recognize the idea in such diverse messages as the advertising jingle or the Marsellaise or the Internationale, or even the songs of Bob Dylan. Hendrick Smith in The Russians reports that young Russians are much better informed on the doings of Western rock groups and their songs than middle-aged Americans are.[10] Certainly the attempts of the Russian rulers to prevent the spread of the contagion bears witness to their acceptance of the linkage between the medium and its persuasive impact.

The short film is very like the popular song in its form, message, and structure. The television commercial is the ultimate short film

and has become an art form akin to miniature painting or haiku poetry.[11] The TV commercial, the advertising jingle, and the pop song are so closely related that they sometimes merge into one. For example, the Hilltop TV commercial was simultaneously released as a radio jingle, and later became a pop song "I'd like to teach the world to sing." The Coca Cola company wisely realizing that whenever the tune was heard, the original "I'd like to buy the world a coke" would most likely be evoked.

An example of the short film as a pop song is Noel Black's Skater Dater.[12] It resembles the pop song not so much because it is scored with the type of surfing music of the Beach Boys, but because it is cut to a visual rhythm celebrating the suntanned youth of Southern California having fun with skate boards and confronting the rites of passage specific to adolescents. The message is on the most obvious plane that of the desirability and ease of skateboarding. Of course, short acquaintance with the skateboard may disabuse the receiver of that message of its validity, and rather inculcate a healthy respect for the ability of the expert to make the impossible look effortless, and the ability of the film to create illusion. Be that as it may, the film celebrates youth and life, and makes a suburban Californian scene a region of the mind usually reserved only for songs.

In the field of animation, many Disney products qualify as pop tunes, perhaps the prototype being the Silly Symphony cartoon type. On a different plane entirely, yet still qualifying as a type of pop tune is the Academy Award collage of objects: Frank Film.[13] This is a lyrical evocation of the things of growing up in America---although it is also

a satiric comment on crass materialism. Perhaps this type of film falls on the borderline between pop tune and poem. Here also would best be classified the Braverman kinestasis films American Time Capsule and Braverman's Condensed Cream of Beatles which are still pictures shown at near subliminal cutting rates and cut to a compulsive rhythm.[14]

Joke.

The Canadian National Film Board's What On Earth is an animated extended joke. When a probe from outer space views North America the observers interpret that the automobile is the dominant intelligent species and the people are merely parasites of the autos. Their prognosis for the Earthlings is favorable as they see the impending eradication of the parasites through chemotherapy and mechanical elimination. Similarly, Vukotic's Ersatz comments on modern man's reliance on the instant and synthetic by having his protagonist inflate all his needs--from his automobile to his girl friend.[15]

Both of these films are persuasive and, indeed, didactic. The first film to make a joke was however, only selling the film medium itself. One of the very first commercial films was the Lumière brothers' Watering The Gardner (1895). The boy knots a hose and releases it when the puzzled gardner looks down the nozzle. With such a heritage, the film as a joke can expect to last quite a long time yet.

On another plane is The Most, a cinema vérité rendition of a day in the life of Hugh Hefner.[16] Obviously allowing the camera into his domain to gain a public relations advantage, Mr. Hefner must have regretted his decision as the film is anything but playful. It is a rather cruel joke on its subject.

Poem.

Christian Metz claims that only the non-story-telling short film such as Ruttmer's Berlin or Sucksdorff's Rhythm of a City can be considered as poetry. He specifically excludes the feature from being a poem:

"In a poem there is no story line, and nothing intrudes between the author and the reader. The novelist draws up a world; the poet speaks of the world. The fiction film still seems to me to be closer to the novel than to the poem."[17]

While many films would qualify as poetry under Samuel Johnson's definition of poetry as "a metrical composition," not many would stand up under the requirement of "the best way of saying something" which is, perhaps, a more useful definition. In fact, on first inspection, the idea of film as poetry seems irreconcilable with "the ultimate authority of the photograph," which is, of course, the basic material of the motion picture. Still photography, as Christian Metz has pointed out "was never intended to tell stories." (Although, of course, some outstanding still pictures, like the Hogarthian prints, are worth the proverbial thousand words and are imprinted in our memories for life--witness the Ruby shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald). Metz makes the intellectual leap from the still photograph to the cinema very succinctly: "Going from one image to two images, is to go from image to language.[19]

Poetry in the film is, however, not confined to the surreal and the fantastic--the filtered, hazy, distorted effects--although this is certainly a part of the poetry of film. Rather elements of poetry are basic to the nature of the film: "The basis of communication in the cinema is emotional," Walter Lassaly has written, "and once this has been

recognized all sorts of enigmas can be solved."[20]

Two well known short films will serve as examples as filmic poetry. The first, Dream of Wild Horses is a non narrative visualization of horses running through spray, smoke and fire—often in slow motion.[21] Naturally this description is as inadequate as describing Browning's "My Last Duchess" as the musings of a nobleman on a painting. The poem is its own description, and to describe it one must repeat it. The second example is The Red Balloon,[22] a fantasy set in Paris where a small boy has a balloon which follows him like a dog. A gang sets upon him and the balloon, leading to an end where all the balloons in the city come and carry him away. This film is perhaps one of the best known of all short films and is as popular with adults as with the first and second graders who are able to give their opinions as to its meaning.

The short film is perhaps the most convenient film for the film teacher to use. Given the conventional academic practice of dividing class time into periods, one has adequate time to introduce, show, and discuss the film. The short film is not a major persuasive force in our society, yet it can be an extremely interesting one to the film student in particular, and to the student of communication in general.

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[2]Erik Barnouw, Documentary: A History of the Non Fiction Film (Oxford University Press, 1974) p. 213.

[3]"Network Special: $1.41," TV Guide (March 5, 1977), 19-20.

[4]Myles P. Breen, "Using Television Documentaries as Instructional Films," Educational Screen and Audiovisual Guide, 50, No. 11 (November, 1971), 4-5.

[5]TV Guide p. 20.

[6]Serious Business Company Catalog (Berkley, CA, 1976), 13-16.

[7]American Film Institute, National Survey of Film and Television Higher Education: Report of Findings (Washington: A.F.I., 1976), p. 15.

[8]See Stephen Crane's classic short story and James Agee's shooting script in T. J. Ross, Film and the Liberal Arts (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), pp. 19-69.

[9]Written and directed by Edmond Sechan (1974). Distributed by Images, 2 Rudy Avenue, Rye, New York 10580.

[10]Hendrick Smith, The Russians (New York: Quadrangle, The New York Times Book Co., 1976), pp. 171-178.

[11]"And Now a Word About Commercials," Time, July 12, 1968, pp. 55-60.

[12](1965). Distributed by Pyramid. Part of a trilogy on The American Boy, the other two films being River Boy (1966) and Reflections (1967).

[13]Directed by Frank Mouris (1973). Pyramid. Academy Award winner.

[14]American Time Capsule (1968); Braverman's Condensed Cream of Beatles (1973). Pyramid.

[15]Ersatz, directed by Dusan Vukotic (1969). Contemporary Films. McGraw-Hill.

[16]Directed by Gordon Sheppard and Richard Ballentine (1963), Pyramid.

[17]Christian Metz, Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 206.

[18]For a discussion on this see A. William Bluem's Documentary in American Television (New York: Hastings House, 1965), p. 84; also Seigfreid Kracauer, Theory of Film (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 1-23.

[19]Metz, p. 46.

[20]Bluem, p. 121.

[21]Directed by Denys Colombe de Daunant (1960), Images.

[22]The Red Balloon, directed by Albert Lamorisse (1956), Brandon.

APPENDIX

The Short Film---COURSE OUTLINE

Texts: Alan Casebier, Film Appreciation (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976).
J. Dudley Andrew, The Major Film Theories (New York, Oxford University Press, 1976).

Week 1. One Eyed Men are Kings--15 mins. Red Balloon--34 mins.

" 2. Skater Dater--18 mins.

" 3. The River Boy--17 mins. Reflections--15 mins.

" 4. Sucksdorff: People of a City--18 mins. Hunter and the Forest--8 mins.

" 5. Gray Gull the Hunter--19 mins. People of the Reindeer--20 mins.

" 6. Bambi and Godzilla--2 mins. Dream of Wildhorses--9 mins. Rail--13 mins. Glass--11 mins.

" 7. NFB City of Gold--22 mins. Shepherd--13 mins. Cosmic Zoom--8 mins.

" 8. Clio Awards--30 mins. The Frank Film--30-36--9 mins.

" 9. Silences--12 mins. The Star Spangled Banner--5 mins.

" 10. Out of Special EPS 47 16--15 mins. Omega--13 mins. Face of Lincoln--22 mins. Solo--15 mins. The Making of Solo--8 mins.

" 11. The Real West.

" 12. The History of Animation. Freeway Phobia I and II.

" 13. Frame By Frame: The Art of Animation EPS 47. 15-13 mins. Ersatz--10 mins. Cages-- 9 mins. Claude--3 mins. Conformity--8 mins. Window on Canada--31 mins. What on Earth--10 mins.

" 14. The Fable--19 mins. American Time Capsule--3 mins.

" 15. Eskimo Sea Hunters--22 mins. The Upturned Face--10 mins. Victory at Sea--94 mins. (28-28-28).

" 16. (Something from Pyramid of EFB that is current e.g., Car Salesman).